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Armenia: Arbitrary Detentions, Brutal Beatings

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[Armenian](#) authorities have arbitrarily detained dozens of people linked to the ongoing, largely peaceful, protests and beaten many of them, Human Rights Watch said today. The authorities also have pressed unjustified criminal charges against numerous protest leaders and some participants and denied them basic rights of detainees.

"The Armenian authorities' response to Yerevan's largely peaceful protests has been excessive and cruel," said [Jane Buchanan](#), associate Europe and Central Asia director at Human Rights Watch. "The tense atmosphere at some protests is no justification for detaining people arbitrarily, beating them, and bringing disproportionate criminal charges against them."

There have been protests in Armenia's capital, Yerevan, almost every night since July 17, 2016, after a group of armed men from a radical opposition group seized a Yerevan police station, killing one policeman and taking several hostages. Before the gunmen surrendered on July 31, public support for them and disaffection with the government grew into a wide protest movement in Yerevan.

The protests have been largely peaceful, with isolated incidents of violence by some protesters. Police in some cases responded to protests with excessive force and with large-scale arbitrary detentions. Human Rights Watch interviewed victims of arbitrary detention and police beatings, witnesses to the detentions and abuse, and lawyers for many of those detained.

Police beat many detainees, in some cases severely, and in some cases did not allow them to get prompt medical care for their injuries. For example, on July 18, police detained a 26-year-old activist, Andranik Aslanyan, at Yerevan's Liberty Square and severely beat him and two other men in the back of a police van. Police kicked, punched, and beat Aslanyan on the head, face, back, and legs, spat on him, and rubbed his face on their boots to humiliate him. He was then held for three hours before being taken to a hospital even though he, and others, asked for and needed immediate medical attention.

Armenia's Special Investigative Service has opened investigations into the police behavior, and these investigations should be swift, thorough, and lead to accountability for police who engaged in unlawful conduct, Human Rights Watch said. The Special Investigative Service told Human Rights Watch on August 3, that it has also opened investigations into the police actions on July 29, as well as into the police behavior on other protest nights, and that investigators have not yet identified any suspects or made any arrests among law enforcement agencies.

Police have detained hundreds of people since July 17, but law enforcement authorities have not publicly disclosed exactly how many people were detained, where they were held, how many have been released, or how many are under arrest and facing criminal charges. The Armenian Ombudsman's Office told Human Rights Watch that authorities detained at least 220 people from July 17 through 30, and brought criminal charges against approximately 45 of them.

Police can detain protesters who commit acts of violence or violate public order laws. But detention is considered arbitrary if it does not comply with the legal framework for detention and is not based on the person's specific behavior but instead is a response to the person's legitimate exercise of rights or freedoms guaranteed under international law.

In some cases, police held detainees for up to 12 hours without documenting the detentions. Under Armenian law, police have three hours to prepare a detention record or release the detainee. In at least two cases, police held groups of people – in one case more than 100 people – for longer periods in a gymnasium on a base belonging to interior troops.

The authorities released many detainees without charge. Of the approximately 45 in pretrial detention, many face criminal charges for allegedly "organizing mass disorder," which carries a penalty of up to 10 years in prison. In some cases, authorities have brought, or threatened to bring, charges against political activists for illegal weapons possession. In two of the cases, detainees claim that police planted the weapons on them.

Authorities denied many detainees their basic rights, including prompt access to a lawyer of their choosing and the opportunity to inform a relative of their detention and whereabouts. In some cases, people searched desperately for their relatives before finding out they had been detained. Among the vocal protest leaders facing charges of organizing mass disorder are Andreas Ghukasyan, an opposition politician, and Hovsep Khurshudyan, David Sanasaryan, and Armen Martirosyan, all senior members of the opposition Heritage Party. The men's lawyers told Human Rights Watch that the primary basis for the charges in all cases is police testimony. Witnesses and the men's lawyers told Human Rights Watch that the police beat Ghukasyan and Sanasaryan in detention and denied them basic medical care.

On August 1 and 2, courts ordered the four leaders be held for two months in pretrial detention, ruling that each is a flight risk and would hinder the investigation or commit another crime if freed on bail. The men's lawyers said that investigators did not provide the court specific facts to support the need for custody, but simply stated all possible legal grounds for denial. Without explanation, the judges rejected all defense motions to release the men, referring only to the gravity of the crime and envisaged sanction for it.

In determining whether to authorize a person's detention, human rights law requires the judicial authorities, at a minimum, have enough evidence to establish a reasonable suspicion that the person committed an offense. To justify pretrial detention, the European Court of Human Rights, whose rulings are binding on Armenia, has repeatedly clarified that a court needs evidence of specific facts and personal circumstances relevant to the accused justifying pretrial detention, and cannot rely on "general and abstract" reasons for detention.

"The authorities have presented no meaningful grounds for holding these four protest leaders," Buchanan said. "They should be released immediately on bail, pending the outcome of the investigation and a fair trial."

The authorities have also denied the men the opportunity to make phone calls and to have family visits, claiming that contact with family members or others could compromise the investigation. Under Armenian law, detainees have the right to one phone call per week and one family visit every two weeks.

Under Armenian law, the crime of "organizing mass disorder" requires that the disorder be "accompanied with violence, pogroms, arson, destruction or damage to property, using fire-arms, explosives or explosive devices, or by armed resistance to the representative of the authorities." Charging leaders and participants of the July 29 protests with this crime is unjustified and disproportionate, given that, although at times tense, the demonstration was largely nonviolent, Human Rights Watch said. Such over-charging, when the facts on the ground do not support them, appears intended to intimidate protesters and deter them from exercising their rights to freedom of expression and assembly to demonstrate against the government, rather than any genuine effort to uphold law and order.

The majority of those in pretrial custody are at the Nubarashen pretrial detention facility, which has a significant overcrowding problem. An independent expert with a monitoring group that, under the auspices of Armenia's Justice Ministry, observes conditions in facilities for detainees and prisoners, told Human Rights Watch that the facility's capacity is 840 inmates, but in January, it held 942 detainees. Excessive use of pretrial detention following the recent protests and dozens of new detainees may exacerbate overcrowding. One lawyer reported that his client, detained on July 20 in relation to the protests, is held in a cell with 14 inmates sleeping in shifts because there are only 12 beds.

Armenia is a party to multiple human rights treaties, including the European Convention on Human Rights and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, that require it to ensure effective investigations and appropriate prosecutions and punishment of officials responsible for serious violations of human rights, including ill-treatment.

"The authorities' detention of protest leaders and denial of basic detainee rights are unjustifiably punitive and seemed designed to send a message to others that public expression of discontent can carry tremendous risks," Buchanan said.

For detailed accounts, please see below.

Human Rights Watch conducted interviews in Yerevan from July 30 to August 4, with 12 victims of police beatings and arbitrary detention from July 17 to July 30. Human Rights Watch also interviewed eight lawyers for people facing criminal charges in relation to the July protests. Some of those facing charges were also victims of police violence. Human Rights Watch also interviewed one lawyer for two people who were released without charge and relatives of two men charged with crimes related to the protests.

Beatings, Delays in Medical Care

Andranik Aslanyan

Police detained Andranik Aslanyan, the 26-year-old activist, on July 18 at Yerevan's Liberty Square, severely beat him in a police van, then took him to a gym at interior troops base no. 1033, Aslanyan said:

Four policemen grabbed me, twisted my arms behind my back and stuffed me into a police van together with two other men. When they closed the doors, they started to beat us, kicking, punching, and beating me on my head, feet, face, and back. They handcuffed me so tightly that it cut into the flesh. I was thrown to the floor of the van, face down, and they continued to beat me. They spit on us to humiliate us even further. Then one of the policemen pushed his boot under my face, kicked me several times and then grabbed my head and pinned it to his boots, trying to put my lips on them.... I told them that they'll be held accountable for this, and every time I said this, they'd beat me even more.... I had bruises all over my back and face, swelling, and a large lump on the back of my head. Every part of my body was in pain.

Police took Aslanyan, along with David Sanasaryan and a third activist, both of whom had also been beaten, to the troop base. At the base's gym, policemen lined them up, facing the wall, searched them, and confiscated their cell phones before taking their handcuffs off. One policeman told Aslanyan to sign a document saying that he disobeyed the legal order of a policeman. Aslanyan refused.

Despite Aslanyan's repeated requests for medical assistance, police called an ambulance only three hours later. Both Aslanyan and Sanasaryan were taken to a hospital for treatment.

The following day, the Special Investigative Service interviewed Aslanyan regarding his treatment. An investigator also sent him for a forensic medical exam. Several days later, Aslanyan received a letter from the Special Investigative Service that it had opened a criminal investigation, but without any details.

David Sanasaryan

Aslanyan said that although his face was pressed to the van's floor, he was aware that the police were also kicking and hitting Sanasaryan, who was also in the van. Aslanyan said: "When we got to the military unit, policemen dragged David out, dropped him on the ground, and continued to beat him. Four or five policemen kicked and punched him, so that at some point David lost consciousness."

Ara Petrossyan, another protester, was also held at the interior troop base on July 18. He spoke with Sanasaryan and tried to help him. Petrossyan saw police bring Sanasaryan, his hands handcuffed behind his back, into the gym and throw him to the floor, and saw him lose consciousness. Petrossyan said:

We wanted to help, but they [police] wouldn't let us. The police did nothing. As he lay on the floor for about 5 to 10 minutes, police checked his pulse a few times. David regained consciousness, but could hardly speak. He asked for water; he said he was nauseated. We feared he had a concussion. The police said maybe he just ate something bad. The doctor from the base checked his blood pressure and pulse and claimed that David was fine. David lay down on the floor, with his bag under his head. After three hours an ambulance took David to the hospital.

Arsen Tadevosyan

Police beat Arsen Tadevosyan, a 30-year-old activist, on July 21, fracturing his jaw. Tadevosyan went to Khorenatsi Street, the location of the besieged police station, at about 10 p.m. on July 20, shortly after skirmishes between police and some protesters. He told Human Rights Watch that together with other activists he was trying to calm the crowd, to avoid further clashes. Shortly after 3 a.m., activists noticed a growing number of police in the area. Tadevosyan said that around the same time another group of protesters arrived, apparently drunk, and that they behaved aggressively, cursing both police and protesters. Police did nothing to isolate them, but instead deemed the entire protest illegal and used a loudspeaker to tell the crowd to disperse within 15 minutes. Police made another announcement five minutes later, then quickly moved in. Two policemen grabbed Tadevosyan, twisted his arms, and took him behind the police cordon and

assaulted him, he said. Police took him to Yerevan's Shengavit police station around 4 a.m. It was only at around 10 a.m. that an ambulance took him to a hospital. He said:

Four policemen started to beat me. They were hitting me on my head and punching me in the face, breaking my jaw in two places. They were hitting nonstop. After my jaw was broken, I put my hand on my face, saying, "Don't hit me on my head, please, don't." But they continued to beat me even more. At some point I lost consciousness, and came back to my senses after searing pain from another blow. They were punching and kicking all over my body, my ribs, back, everywhere.

When they were done beating they wanted to put me in a police car. I was holding my jaw and I was bleeding. There was no space in first two police cars that drove by, as they were full with other detainees. Police continued to beat me until they found a space in the third car and drove me away with three other detainees.

I thought that the beating part was over, but as we arrived at a police station, police created a sort of a corridor from the car to the station, about 5 to 6 meters long and they continued to kick and punch as we were taken from the car to the station. The beating continued inside too, as they lined us all up along the wall, searched us, took our phones and punched us few times.

I was telling everyone that my jaw was broken, my face was swollen and bleeding. I was in so much pain; I was screaming from pain. Policemen were telling me that I was exaggerating, although it was very visible that my jaw was broken, my whole face was swollen.

Tadevosyan was told to sign several documents, which he did not read. "I was in so much pain, that I was just signing anything they [police] were giving me, in the hope that they would call an ambulance," he said. Doctors at the hospital treated Tadevosyan for multiple fractures to the left side of his jaw and near the chin, as well as a concussion.

At about 2 or 3 p.m., Tadevosyan was released from the hospital and went back to the Shengavit police station to retrieve his cell phone. After he waited several hours, an investigator arrested Tadevosyan on suspicion of participating in mass disorder and ordered his transfer to a temporary detention facility. Tadevosyan continued to have severe pain and requested medical assistance again, but police refused to call an ambulance.

After Tadevosyan arrived at the temporary detention center, an official called an ambulance, which transferred him to a local hospital. After he spent a day in the hospital, the authorities transferred Tadevosyan to a prison hospital at Erebuni, where police guarded his medical ward. On July 23, Tadevosyan was released without charge.

Human Rights Watch documented numerous due process violations in Tadevosyan's case. Police did not allow him to call his family until his second day of detention. Tadevosyan was detained and designated a suspect without having a chance to retain a lawyer of his choosing. He was also compelled to sign documents that he did not understand.

An investigator from the Special Investigating Service, the agency in charge of investigating crimes by law enforcement officers, questioned Tadevosyan several days later and on August 1, granted him victim status in an investigation.

Andreas Gukasyan

Police detained Andreas Gukasyan, the politician with the opposition Heritage Party, late on the night of July 29, his lawyer, Yervand Varusyan, told Human Rights Watch. During the arrest, the police knocked Gukasyan down and beat him extensively with truncheons on his body and legs. The lawyer said he saw Gukasyan's bruises when he visited him in detention on July 30. The lawyer said that Gukasyan has constant pain in his knees and other areas, and needs help walking.

He made four requests to the investigator to be taken to the hospital for an X-ray, but received no response and no explanation until August 1, when authorities allowed him to be taken to a hospital for an X-ray and examination.

Armen Oganessian

Human Rights Watch spoke with the lawyer representing Armen Oganessian, a protester detained on July 29, when police violently dispersed protesters. Oganessian helped a journalist, Robert Ananyan of *AI+* information agency, bandage his fragmentation wound from the stun grenades police used to disperse the protesters. When a local resident offered to drive the journalist away from the scene, Oganessian also got into the car. Police stopped the car after a few hundred meters, took the driver and Oganessian out, and started beating them.

Police punched and kicked Oganessian and struck him with clubs, causing multiple bruises to his left ear and leg, and a lump on the back of his head. One policeman tried to choke him, almost causing him to lose consciousness. Human Rights Watch independently corroborated the circumstances of Oganessian's detention in an interview with Ananyan.

Police took Oganessian to Nor-Nork police station, where he was arrested on suspicion of participating in mass disorder and taken to a temporary detention site in Erebuni. Oganessian did not have access to a lawyer of his choosing until 4 p.m. the next day, on July 30. He was released on August 1, for lack of evidence to support the charges.

Human Rights Watch also [documented](#) separately how police beat journalists and protesters during the dispersal of the July 29 demonstration.

Arbitrary Detention and Denial of Due Process

Authorities routinely denied detainees the opportunity to inform a relative or loved one about their detention and have prompt access to a lawyer of their choosing, fundamental rights of detainees and important safeguards to prevent ill-treatment and guarantee an effective defense. In many instances, police also violated the requirement under Armenian law to prepare a detention report within three hours or release the detainee.

On at least two occasions, on July 18 and July 28, police arbitrarily detained people at bases in Yerevan belonging to the interior troops. Police denied entry to lawyers, did not allow those detained to inform their relatives of their whereabouts, and denied them food, detainees said. Some people reported beatings on the way to the bases.

Police also held detainees in police stations in and around Yerevan. In some cases, unidentified men in civilian clothes, driving civilian cars, detained people and took them to police stations.

On July 18, the authorities held over 100 people for at least 12 hours in a gymnasium at interior troop base no. 1033. Among them was a political activist, Albert Bagdasaryan, 56. Police had detained Bagdasaryan during a gathering of people on July 17 on Korenatsi Street, near the captured police station. Bagdasaryan said:

Two or three policemen grabbed me, pushed my head down, and stuffed me into a car. They were rude. They didn't introduce themselves. They sped to the base. There were at least 10 guys with automatic weapons in a line guarding us. They didn't say anything to us; they didn't explain anything.

There were women and young women too among detainees. They gave us water but didn't give us any food.... At one point one policeman started swearing aggressively at us detainees. We got agitated and wanted to retaliate. But a more senior officer intervened and stopped the swearing.

Petrossoyan, detained at a protest on Liberty Square in the evening of July 18, described detention at the same base:

There was a protest, I went with my friends. The goal was to be peaceful. I saw how some policemen very rudely dragged David Sanasaryan to a police car. We ran and tried to help him. ... I tried to grab David from behind, but police surrounded me and put me into a small police car with four other people.

They took us to a base [of the interior troops], not to a police station. There were guys there with masks, automatic weapons, truncheons. They made us stand facing the wall with our hands up.... After maybe 40 minutes they gave us some water and allowed us to smoke. Then they let us sit down. I was released after two hours.

A lawyer for three other men detained at the interior ministry troop base no. 1033 confirmed this description of events:

Police again detained Petrossyan at around midnight on July 30, about a kilometer from the besieged police station, where police had, about an hour before, violently dispersed protesters. There was about 30 of us. We hadn't participated in [the main protest]. Three or four police cars drove up. We started to run. They screamed "stop" and ran after us. They detained us really aggressively. They hit me on the head, and put my brother into a car with real force. It was a small car, and they stuffed a lot of us in the back, so we could hardly sit. They didn't explain where they were taking us. They swore at us in the car and told us to shut up.

They took us to the yard of some building, I don't know where. There were a lot of police. A policeman there took my phone and I haven't gotten it back. They pulled us out of the car and stuffed us into a different police car. They took us to a police station in Malatia [district]. They held me there for 12 hours or so, letting us go at about noon. My brother was held in a police station in another town, in Echmiadzin. They let him go about the same time. One guy [detained when we were], and in a different car, got beaten on the way. A policeman kicked him with his knee and broke a rib.

The whole time I was there, I couldn't make any calls. They had my phone. Some guys asked to call, and the police said, "No, no way!" They threatened us and told us not to go to more demonstrations, saying, "If you get caught again, it will be very bad for you."

Detention of Yerishe Petrossyan

A lawyer for Yerishe Petrossyan, a well-known composer and musician, told Human Rights Watch that police detained Petrossyan and dozens of others on July 28, at a protest on Khorenatsi Street. Police put the detainees on buses and took them to interior troop base no. 1032 in Davitashen district. The lawyer, who had spoken with Petrossyan, said that police kept the detainees for 10 hours, with armed police guarding them. Police provided no food and insufficient water and denied lawyers' access to the detainees. Police released the detainees later that night and in the early morning hours of July 29.

Soso Markaryan

Soso Markaryan, 23, participated in a protest on the evening of July 20 on Khorenatsi Street. At around 10 p.m., some protesters clashed with police. Markaryan's lawyer said that later in the evening police fired stun grenades into the crowd to disperse it, and one exploded near Markaryan, injuring him in the legs. As he fled, he threw rocks at police who were attempting to detain some protesters. Markaryan went home, where he treated his wounds himself. The next morning, on July 21, police detained Markaryan at his workplace and took him to a police station.

The authorities did not give Markaryan the opportunity to inform his family of his detention or request a lawyer of his choosing. Instead, they assigned him a public defender, claiming that they needed urgently to conduct numerous procedural steps and did not have time to wait for his preferred lawyer to arrive. Markaryan's relatives had a lot of difficulty determining his whereabouts, learning his location only on July 22.

On July 23, a Saturday, Ara Zakharyan, the lawyer Markaryan's family hired to represent him, asked the authorities to let him meet with Markaryan. However, an investigator claimed it was not possible to visit Markaryan in the temporary detention facility on Saturday or Sunday. On Monday, July 25, the investigator claimed to be too busy. Under Armenian law, the investigator must be present to confirm the choice of a defense lawyer with the detainee.

Zakharyan met with Markaryan for the first time only at noon on July 26, more than five days after he was detained. A court had already ordered Markaryan be held for two months in pretrial detention. He faces charges of organizing mass disorder.

"Karen"

Karen, whose name was changed for security considerations, was detained on July 29, just before the police violently dispersed protesters in the Sari Tagh neighborhood. His lawyer said that at around 10 p.m., several policemen dragged Karen behind the police cordon, roughed him up, put him into a police car and took him to Nor-Nork district police station. Karen managed to call his wife and tell her about his detention before police confiscated his cell phone. Law enforcement officials designated him a suspect in mass disorder, and transferred him to the Erebuni temporary detention facility. Karen spent three nights in official custody. Despite his lawyer's persistent efforts, she was denied an access to her client for the entire period.

The lawyer was outside the temporary detention facility on July 30 and 31, after being asked by Karen's wife to represent him. The lawyer repeatedly called investigators, requesting access to her client, which required an investigator's presence at their initial meeting. Investigators first said that no investigators were available to go to the temporary detention facility for the meeting. Then investigators stopped responding to her calls. The lawyer found out later that the investigator had compelled Karen to agree to accept a government-appointed lawyer. Karen's wife was allowed to visit him only a few hours before his release, on August 1.

Alleged Planting of Evidence to Bring Weapons Charges

Armen Mikaelyan

Authorities detained Armen Mikaelyan after a protest at approximately 2:30 a.m. on July 27. He alleges that they planted a weapon on him when they detained him. Mikaelyan is a member of Sasna Tser, the informal group whose members violently took over the Erebuni police station on July 17. Mikaelyan did not participate in the takeover. His wife told Human Rights Watch that as she, Mikaelyan, his parents, and sister left the protest near the police station, two civilian cars with tinted windows and without license plates pulled up next to the family. Eight men in civilian clothes who did not identify themselves grabbed Mikaelyan, forced him into one of the cars, and drove him to a police station on the outskirts of Yerevan. Other men forcibly held Mikaelyan's wife and father, apparently to prevent them from interfering.

Mikaelyan's lawyer, who met with him in detention later in the morning of July 27, said Mikaelyan told him that police planted a gun on him while he was handcuffed in the police car. Mikaelyan's wife told Human Rights Watch that at the protest Mikaelyan was wearing a summer shirt and loose-fitting jeans, which would have made it very difficult for him to hide a gun on his person. Mikaelyan was charged with carrying an illegal weapon and sent for two months in Nubarashen pretrial detention center.

Albert Bagdasaryan

Albert Bagdasaryan, the political activist detained on July 18, was again detained on July 29, after meeting with other political activists in central Yerevan. Two cars stopped and eight men in civilian clothes grabbed him and ordered him into the car. He said:

They took me to Arabkir police station. When we pulled into the station yard, about 20 police gathered around the car. One officer put handcuffs on me, behind my back. He yelled at others to grab me, "Pull his arms up, push his head down!" They took me to a room in the station and I could feel something in the back pocket of my jeans. In all that chaos in the police yard, they planted a knife on me. I reached over as I could with my handcuffed hands and felt the handle. And that way my fingerprint was on it. They took the knife as evidence.

They wrote up a document, but then put it away. They didn't charge me. My lawyer was waiting outside in the station yard, but they didn't let him in. I started to feel sick while I was there. My blood pressure went way up. They let me go and said that I should go home and call an ambulance from there. I have had no more information about the case, but I worry that they will bring it up again and use it against me.

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